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ABSTRACT

What is meant by saying that reality is socially constructed or that writing is a social process must be thought about carefully. Advocates of a social constructivist view of writing have been able to challenge dominant cognitivist and expressionist paradigms surprisingly quickly. However, such a swift victory needs to be examined. When tested in the classroom, attempts at collaborative writing often fail. In addition, the appropriateness of the dominant metaphor of the writing as a social process position, "community," is questionable. Writing is not just cooperation and identification, but also competition and division, not just a reflection of reality, but also a deflection. Preoccupation with epistemological arguments for writing as a social process have served as protection in a number of ways, and may have been part of the continuing effort to legitimize composition studies. It is questionable whether the privileging of epistemology, and the related downplaying of politics, ideology, and psychology, has constituted a substantial change. Finally, the current advocacy of writing as a social process may have permitted the escape of a potentially painful awareness of the writing teacher's role in the educational system--not wanting to recognize in these theories that teaching is work, as is learning for students. (ARH)

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WHAT IS SOCIAL ABOUT WRITING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS?

My talk today will, I should in fairness warn you, be exploratory and speculative. In responding to the question raised by my title, I will make a number of assertions that I can't prove (at least in the traditional scholarly sense) and raise a number of questions that I can't answer. Like Kenneth Burke, whose project informs much of my thinking here, I will end my remarks not with a careful summary but with a perplexed "Where are we now?"

Perhaps the best way into my talk is to explain the origin of my title. This question, "What is Social about Writing as a Social Process?," grew out of my surprise at how quickly advocates of a social constructivist or epistemic view of writing (often referred to by the shorthand term "writing as a social process") have been able to challenge dominant cognitivist and expressionist paradigms in our field. Those advocating this position--theorists like Kenneth Bruffee, Marilyn Cooper, Jim Reither, and, of course, Karen Le Fevre--have located many arguments for their position, from the pedagogical and practical to the theoretical. I think we could agree, however, that epistemological arguments--arguments that emphasize, as Bruffee does in "Collaborative Learning and the `Conversation of Mankind,'" that "knowledge is an artifact created by a community

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of knowledgeable peers constituted by the language of that community"646)--have been given a privileged role and had a particularly important impact in this debate. As we are all aware, much is at stake in these arguments, which challenge the western Cartesian-Kantian philosophical tradition.

How, I found myself wondering, could such an apparently radical position gain influence so quickly? (Marilyn Cooper first presented her influential "Ecology of Writing," later published in College English, just three years ago at this conference. This year's program is full of panels that in one way or another explore the implications of viewing writing as a social process.) If the differences between an individualistic (whether cognitivist or expressionist) perspective and a social view of knowledge and writing are as dramatic as we've claimed they are, why (or how) have many of us made the shift with such apparent ease?

I include myself in the "many of us" I've just mentioned quite consciously. I was an early convert to writing as a social process. As a student of rhetoric, I had for some time been convinced of the importance of epistemological issues in theory construction: I had read Brummet, Scott, Rorty, Ijselling, Grassi, and Geertz. The arguments made by Bruffee and others were also just the ammunition that Andrea Lunsford and I were looking for in our early efforts to explore (and advocate) collaborative writing. Just as importantly, these arguments confirmed and validated Andrea's and my personal experience of

coauthorship, an experience that has been and continues to be rewarding for both of us.

Perhaps it's the Burke in me, but after the intellectual euphoria of my conversion began to diminish, I found myself thinking about motive, strategy, and self-persuasion. Burke teaches us to beware of easy victories, to remember that, in Burke's words, "a rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong (Rhetoric of Motives, xiii). My questioning attitude was increased by my recognition that although I spoke forcefully at conferences and workshops as an advocate of collaborative learning, a pedagogical method favored by social constructivists like Bruffee, I was less than successful in implementing these strategies in my own classroom. Though I am certainly willing to locate pedagogical problems in my own failings as a teacher, I came to believe that my own view of collaborative learning had underestimated not only the cultural, institutional, and ideological barriers to collaborative learning, but the deepness (and, in a sense, the appropriateness) of students' resistance as well. Similarly, as Andrea and I interviewed people who wrote collaboratively throughout the country, we gradually realized that our original view of collaborative writing was equally one-sided. Collaborative writing can be an enriching, productive, socially constructive activity, as it has been for Andrea and me, but it can also represent the exploitation of others and the abandonment of personal responsibility for language.

One way to express my uneasiness about the claims of writing as a social process is to say that I came to question the appropriateness of the metaphor that has dominated the thinking of most of those who advocate this position: community. As Jim Merod notes in The Political Responsibility of the Critic, a work that focuses on literary theory and pedagogy but that applies equally well, in my view, to composition studies, "no term in critical practice is more beguiling than interpretive community. The phrase proposes a body of closely affiliated writers joined to maintain group identity and mutual interests, people on the same side of reality who, even in disagreement, face common tasks and privileges" (107). Merod's use of the term "beguiling" in this statement strikes me as most perceptive. For in priveleging community, empowerment--and yes, collaboration--we may, I have found myself worrying lately, indeed have beguiled ourselves into thinking we have made a more substantial shift in both theory and practice than we really have.

I'd like to explain what I mean by this statement by reminding you of the Burke quotation that all of us who have argued for writing as a social process love to quote: it is, of course, Burke's well-known statement about entering discourse as entering a conversation:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion. . . .You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent,

> depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.
> (Philosophy of Literary Form, p. 110-111)

This image speaks deeply to all of us; for many of us it eloquently describes our introduction to academic and professional discourse. And it represents one aspect of Burke's multi-perspective on language. But notice how it downplays Burke's persistent emphasis on discourse as a function not just of cooperation but of competition, his insistance on the importance not just of identification but division, his awareness that any given terminology is not just "a reflection of reality [but also]...a selection [and]...deflection of reality" (LSA, 45), his argument that we can best locate "the specific nature of language in the ability to use the Negative" (LSA, 419).

To understand how our selection of terms like community, empowerment, and collaboration may have helped us to deflect certain realities, I'd like to look at another well-known, but less-quoted, statement by Burke. The following is Burke's definition of man--we'll forgive him his sexism--from his essay of the same name:

> Man is
> the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
> inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
> separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making
> goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)
> and rotten with perfection (LSA, 16)

This definition, in my view, represents a much fuller articulation of our situation as language-users.

In his insistance that we are not just symbol-using but symbol-misusing; that we are not just moved by the sense of order but goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (which, as Burke notes, inevitably makes for not only "social hierarchy...mystery, [and] guilt" but also "divisions of labor" and "allocations of property protected by the negativities of the law" ["Definition of Man," LSA, 15]); that we are, in the perfect Burkean touch, "rotten with perfection"--in all this Burke refuses to allow us to take an overly optimistic view of our human condition or our motives. Burke also, here and elsewhere, refuses to allow us to ignore politics, ideology, and psychology. Burke establishes what he ironically calls "a perfect ending" [21] for his "Definition of Man" with a poem commenting on thermo-nuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missles, for example. And in essays like "Mind, Body and the Unconscious" and "The Thinking of the Body" Burke reminds us that we are indeed more than talking heads.

Last year at this conference, in responding to Greg Myers' critique of collaborative learning theorists, I noted that those of us who have based our advocacy of collaborative learning methods on social constructivist epistemological theories, as articulated by Rorty, Geertz, and others, have in some respects been naive. We have tended to see our recent escape from the dualistic straightjacket of Cartesianism and philosophical foundationalism as inherently and inevitably positive. The notion of culture and knowledge as conversation has been

liberating for us, so we have assumed that it would be for our students as well.

At that time, I viewed our problem largely as a failure of nerve: our efforts to embody writing as a social process in our classrooms floundered, I believed then, because of our tendency to treat collaborative learning as an educational method, rather than a holistic philosophy. I still believe that this may be true, but I now think there may be more at stake.

I think, for instance, that our preoccupation with epistemological arguments for writing as a social process--crucial as they are--may function to serve or protect us in a number of ways. Anyone who has studied the history of rhetoric knows that rhetoric's status has depended greatly on its epistemological positioning vis-a-vis philosophy. Has our privileging of epistemology, and the related downplaying of politics, ideology, and psychology, been part of a silent (and largely unconscious) effort to challenge philosophy's dominance? In meeting philosophy's challenge to rhetoric <u>on its own terms</u> (which, in effect, limits the debate to epistemology), are we cutting ourselves off from classical rhetoric's emphasis on the interanimation of rhetoric and politics?

Here's another, somewhat closer-to-home, way of formulating the same concern. Does our privileging of epistemological issues constitute an unconscious strategy in another related struggle: our continuing effort to legitimize composition studies. Does our emphasis on epistemology, in other words, continue,

implicitly if ironically, to uphold what Merod calls "the radical separation that humanist critics have made for so long between the `literary' and the 'imaginative' on one side and the political and institutional world...on the other" (9-10)? (As composition teachers, we would of course resist defining our realm as the `literary' and the `imaginative.' But if we exclude politics and institutions--the world of productive forces and of power (Merod, 10)--have we really made a substantial change?)

Finally, to speak most personally, does our current advocacy of writing as a social process implicitly allow us to escape a potentially painful awareness of our own role in the educational system? In writing-as-a-social-process terms, we conceive of our role as that of empowering students, of enabling them to join genuine discourse communities. We have tended <u>not</u> to talk about students' resistance to this empowerment or their effort to subvert our mission by demanding that we become, in Lacan's terms, the "subject who is supposed to know" (Jay, 785). We have not asked "how [we] are positioned within the culture, how [our] work is used, and how [we] lend [ourselves] to those uses" (Merod, p. 19). We have not wanted to recognize in our theories (as opposed to the practice of our overburdened lives) that our teaching is work, as is our students' learning.

As I speak I am aware, as I was when I wrote these words, of the looseness and imprecision of these questions. For a variety of reasons, however, it seems more important to attempt to articulate these concerns than to present a neat argument. In

drawing these comments to a close, I'd like to emphasize that in questioning our privileging of epistemological arguments for writing as a social process I don't mean to challenge the essential nature of epistemological issues. Rather, I want to point out that, as my earlier quotation from Burke's essay on "Terministic Screens" reminds us, any given approach or terminology is not just "a reflection of reality...but a selection...and also a deflection of reality" (LSA, 45).

I want to challenge us all to think more carefully about just what we mean when we say that reality is socially constructed or that writing is a social process. Have we conceived of the social in the fullest, richest terms? Both current-traditional and process-oriented rhetorics have tended to bracket the political, ideological, and (in the Lacanian sense) the psychoanalytical. Does the movement for writing as a social process, as currently conceived, differ significantly in this respect? With the exception of theorists like Bartholomae and Bizzell, few of us, it seems to me, have come to terms with the fact that, as Eagleton argues, "...language is power, conflict, and struggle--weapon as much as medium, poison as well as cure, the bars of the prison-house as well as a possible way out" (p. 104). Nor have we wanted to recognize, as Robert Con Davis argues in his introduction to College English's special issue on psychoanalysis and pedagogy, that writing and reading "as composing/interpreting...[represent] a `doing,' not merely a `knowing'....[that] the performative aspects of teaching/learning

goes markedly beyond (cognitive) knowing" (625).

It has been tremendously reassuring to me to realize that Burke has addressed many of these questions and problems before us. And so it seems appropriate to close with a Burkean "And where are we now?" Speaking for myself, I must say that I feel very much off balance. I have been forced to abandon what I now recognize has been a traditional humanist approach to language and education. But I am unwilling or unable to position myself clearly or to determine just what the consequences of my questions and concerns are for my teaching. I recognize, as once I did not, that "...a way of teaching writing is never innocent" (Berlin, p. 25). But I have been unable to arrive at an alternative that not only makes theoretical sense but recognizes and responds to the complexities of my life as a woman, teacher, and citizen. Finally, I have raised these questions and problems, then, in the hope that <u>together</u> we can begin to address them.

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